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Baltic Security and NATO Enlargement

Hans Binnendijk and Jeffrey Simon**Conclusion**

Slow improvement between Russia and the Baltic states is evident, but many remaining problems could turn to flashpoints if Russian ultranationalists come to power.

Progress has been achieved in promoting Baltic domestic reforms and in integrating with Western European institutions.

The Baltic states are concerned that their security can be undercut if the NATO enlargement process appears to stop after an initial enlargement.

The Baltic states' strategy focuses on the long-term; it is a slow process based on building concrete security steps and economic integration.

Three Separate Baltic States

The Baltic states are often discussed as a group without regard to their profound differences. Estonia and Latvia orient towards the Nordic states and both are primarily Lutheran. Lithuania is more Central European, has a close history with Poland, and is primarily Catholic. Latvian and Lithuanian are Indo-European languages while Estonian is closer to Finnish. Estonia and Latvia have Russian minorities that make up 30.3 percent and 34 percent of their respective 1.5 and 2.65 million populations, while Lithuania's 3.6 million population has a 9.4 percent Russian and 7 percent Polish minority.

The Baltic states share small size, geography, and five decades as republics of the Soviet Union. They all seek integration with the West but fear that Russian nationalism will deny them that right. Despite their differences, they will probably share a common fate.

Russian Power and Baltic Security

Other than two decades of independence after the First World War, the Baltic states have been controlled by Russia for the past two centuries. They were occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940 and again in 1944. Local populations were moved to Siberia by the hundreds of thousands as Russians were encouraged to settle in the region. Borders were adjusted. While the Baltic states chose not to be included in Russia's Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), many Russians regret the loss of these three countries and are prepared to intervene militarily should an incident occur. Because it considers the Baltic states to be

in its sphere of influence, Moscow uses intimidation against them in ways that it would not with other European states. The Russian mafia is also prevalent in the Baltic states. It is no surprise, therefore, that there is a high degree of anxiety in the Baltic states about their ability to retain their independence, sovereignty, and Western orientation.

The most sensitive issues are citizenship and treatment for Russian minorities. Estonia's minority is concentrated in the East while Latvia's is concentrated in its largest cities. These two states are concerned that they will lose their sovereignty and cultural identity if they do not maintain strict citizenship laws excluding many ethnic Russians from basic political rights like voting in national elections and running for local office. Lithuania, however, has essentially given all of its Russians citizenship, whereas Estonia revised its laws this year to make the process even more difficult for Russian citizens. Because the five-year residency requirement and exams on the Estonian language, culture, and constitution are similar to the U.S. nationalization procedures, Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observers monitoring the process now seem less critical. But the majority of the Russian community in Estonia is socially isolated from Estonians and generally speaks little Estonian. The hurdles for them are high even though many have lived all of their lives in Estonia. Russians generally refer to the policy as "Apartheid."

Another sensitive issue is the border dispute between Estonia and Russia. The border agreed to in the 1920 Treaty of Tartu was moved westward during the Second World War. Although Estonia has tentatively conceded the disputed territory to Russia in recent negotiations, it seeks reference to the Tartu Treaty in the new agreement in an effort to make Russia acknowledge that their annexation was illegal and to justify its citizenship laws. This Russia so far has refused to do, and the negotiations seem stalled.

While the Russian troop withdrawals from all three states have been completed, the legal aspects remain an issue in Estonia. Two treaties signed in July 1995 implement the withdrawal and provide financially for 10,000 Russian officers who remained behind. But the Estonian legislature has delayed ratifying them in an apparent effort to gain leverage over the border negotiations.

Though troops have withdrawn from Latvia, approximately 900 Russians with their families remain at the Skrunda radar station, which is leased to Russia until August 31, 1998, with an additional 18 months for dismantling. The March 1995 European Stability Pact tasks OSCE to monitor Latvia's agreements with Russia to include troop withdrawal and compliance on the treatment of retired Russian military officers in Latvia.

Militarily, the most important issue for Russia is access to Kaliningrad. The three-year access agreement has expired and a one-year extension has been granted. Lithuania appears willing to raise the issue again in connection with its efforts to enter NATO.

The outstanding issues between Russia and the Baltic states relate to historical animosities, border disputes, protection of national minorities, disposition of troops, and military transit rights; in short, the traditional causes of most wars. The Baltic states sometimes take seemingly unreasonable positions to protect their fragile sovereignty while the Russians tend to intimidate. While relations have generally improved over the past few years, potential flashpoints for armed conflict remain and could be ignited if an ultra-nationalist comes to power in Russia.

Baltic Defense Capabilities

Baltic defense capabilities are very limited and remain burdened by the need to design and build defense forces from scratch. All three have small professional defense establishments and rely on territorial

defense. Estonia's total defense force comprises 3,500 troops (a 2000-man Army and 1,500 Border and Coast Guards) and a 7,500-man Estonian Defense League. While Latvia's total regular forces number 6,400 (Army 1,600, Navy 900, Air and Air Defense 200, and Border Guard of 3,700), Latvia's Home Guard (Zemessardze) is much larger, numbering 16,500. Lithuania follows a similar model with total regular forces numbering nearly 7,000 (Army 4,300, Air Force 550, Navy 400, and a Voluntary National Defense Service--VNDS--of 1,500). The VNDS also has 12,000 volunteers and prepares citizens for self-defense on a massive scale.

Because the Baltic states' defense capabilities are so limited, traditional self-defense is not achievable. Hence, the general defense strategy might be defined as the "CNN defense," that is, resist for as long as possible on global television and hope to get support from the West. Partnership For Peace (PFP) is an important program in that it helps the Baltic states to justify their military budgets and to design their forces and provides psychological assurance of Western support. Because of their strategy and limited defense capability, the Baltics are very sensitive to CFE flank limitations which allow more Russian forces in the Northern flank.

Regional Security Relationships

The Baltic states believe that Russia has not completely accepted their sovereignty. Since Russia has not apologized for past injustices--as it has to Poland for Katyn, to Hungary for the 1956 invasion, and Czecho-slovakia for 1968--and still refuses to accept the 1920 Tartu Treaty recognizing Baltic independence, Russia believes that the use of Soviet power was legal. Though Russia accepts Baltic independence, it remains "provisional." Hence, the Baltic states believe the option of a "Finnish" model is not open to them because Russia has never accepted Baltic sovereignty. Their view is that they will ultimately be either in the CIS or NATO.

The building blocks for security begin at the regional level. Since Baltic declarations of cooperation were signed in May 1990, defense and security policy coordination has been developed in the Baltic Council, which created a Baltic Council of Ministers in June 1994. Nordic ties are increasingly important. Meetings between Baltic and Nordic prime ministers and foreign and defense ministers have led to cooperation on airspace control, coastlines and borders, and Baltic sea rescue operations. The Nordic countries have also aided in developing the Baltic Battalion, which is coordinated by Denmark and trains in Latvia. Lithuania's new practical military cooperation with Poland includes a combined peacekeeping unit and an airspace management regime. These ties tend to assuage lingering Lithuanian doubts that Kaliningrad could disqualify them for NATO candidacy. In sum, Poland may more closely tie the Baltic states generally, and Lithuania specifically, to NATO as the Alliance enlarges.

Lithuania and Estonia joined the Council of Europe in May 1993; Latvia joined in February 1995 after fulfilling minority rights requirements. The OSCE has played a useful role in preventive diplomacy in all three states, but its work in Latvia on drafting new citizenship laws (which were adopted in July 1994), and in Estonia in monitoring compliance since the January and February 1995 laws on citizenship and language were adopted, has helped prevent Baltic-Russian conflict.

The European Union (EU) is crucial for the Baltic states: it ties them economically and politically to Europe, and psychologically it does not differentiate the Baltics from Central Europeans. The Europe Agreements signed in June 1995 give the Baltic states realistic prospects for joining the EU in the future. The Baltic states have participated in the European Stability Pact and the so-called Baltic Regional Table, which has addressed minority and border questions. In June 1994 the Baltics also acquired Associate Partner status (with neutral Finland and Sweden, who strongly support Baltic sovereignty) in the Western European Union (WEU). As a result, all partners attend WEU Permanent Council meetings

bi-weekly and contribute to the White Paper discussion on European defense in the Permanent Council. Most see the WEU Associate Partner program as very important in their further integration into European structures; some see the WEU as a potential link to enter NATO through a circuitous route.

The Baltic States and NATO

All three Baltic states seek NATO membership. Support for this policy appears widespread. Baltic leaders, believing that only NATO provides hard security against their large neighbor, do everything in their power to demonstrate their value to the Alliance. That is the main purpose of their participation in the Baltic Battalion and in the Bosnia Implementation Force (IFOR) operation. They also express unanimous support for Russian participation in IFOR because it undermines extremist arguments about NATO in Russia.

The NATO enlargement process, however, could create serious difficulties for the Baltic states if mishandled because the process poses a dilemma. Asking the Baltic states to join could provoke Russia to take preemptive military action, as was suggested in an October 1995 Russian Institute For Defense Studies study--disavowed later by Defense Minister Grachev as not reflecting official Russian policy. Leaving them out could also motivate Russia to believe that the West would not respond to aggression, as it did after the Dean Acheson speech about Korea in 1950. In addition, enlarging NATO only to the Visegrad states could harden Russian positions on the Baltic states.

Baltic candidacy also presents a serious problem for NATO. Credible implementation of NATO's Article 5 for these lightly armed countries would require nuclear deterrence and significant forward deployment of troops, a highly dangerous and expensive option in former Soviet republics. A hollow commitment, on the other hand, could undermine the credibility of all of NATO's Article 5 commitments.

Baltic leaders are realistic about these difficulties and recognize that NATO membership may be a long wait. But for them it is vital that the process remain truly open. Lithuanian Defense Minister Linkevicius summarized their strategy as "deriving deterrence from the process [and] going silently into NATO one project at a time."

Advancing From Soft to Hard Security

U.S. strategy needs to take a series of practical steps to advance the soft security that has been developing in the Baltic states to harder security. Deterrence policy for the West need not include military response (at least for now). Consistent with U.S. non-recognition policy during the Cold War, we must make it clear to Russia that if it undermines Baltic stability and security, it would be costly in economic and political terms and could restart the Cold War. Correspondingly, we need to make it clear to the Baltic states that we support their long-term goal of integrating into Europe. In this vein, Secretary of Defense Perry's November 1995 visit provided an enormous psychological boost to the Baltic states.

In NATO, PFP and the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) are important in creating a framework to address hard security issues. All three Baltic states are active in PFP, which constitutes the basic framework for practical military cooperation: for participating in military exercises, preparing for peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance activities, developing defense force structures, and acquiring interoperability and standardization. The NACC, which is larger and not as developed as the WEU Permanent Council, could be seen as an instrument to strengthen the Baltic states political interface with NATO. All partners enjoy Article 4 rights so that if a threat to their territorial integrity arises, they can turn to the Alliance to seek a peaceful resolution to the problem. The PFP process itself provides the Baltic states with an element of deterrence, although NATO can find ways to deepen the PFP through

more 16 + 1 activities. These should not be just military activities, but expanded political activities, to include stronger parliamentary ties.

The Baltic states would like to link NATO enlargement to the European Union's enlargement process. The Baltic states are doing their best to understand and meet EU and NATO standards and to demonstrate their contribution to the West by participating in peacekeeping. For NATO enlargement, Lithuania would welcome an EU-like "invitation to negotiate" process, possibly linked to a post-IGC decision. An Estonian view of this "soft" security evolution is the desire to see "the EU flag rise over Tallinn as the NATO flag rises over Warsaw." If the NATO "integration process" stops, it would create the appearance of the West turning its back on the Baltic states and democracy could be threatened there.

Recommendations

As the first phase of NATO enlargement takes place, NATO needs to be careful not to close the process that provides security for the Baltic states.

The United States should encourage efforts by the EU and WEU to accelerate their enlargement to the Baltic States and should encourage U.S. trade and investments as a means of security.

Russia should be made aware that it cannot intimidate the Baltic states at will without paying a price, and that a Russian invasion of the Baltic states could reignite the Cold War.

The Baltic states need to know that flexibility on citizenship and border issues would provide them with greater, not less, security.

Because of scarce resources, PFP funds should be used to assist the Baltic states in maintaining more staff at the Partnership Coordination Cell (PCC) at SHAPE and at NATO Headquarters.

A broadened and deepened PFP political program should be achieved.

The United States should update and expand the mandate for U.S. mobile liaison training teams.

This paper is the result of a trip made by the authors to Estonia and Lithuania at the end of November 1995. For more information contact Dr. Hans Binnendijk at (202) 287-9211, or Internet: binnendijkh@ndu.edu; or Dr. Jeffrey Simon at (202) 287-9219 ext. 524, or Internet: simonj@ndu.edu. Both can be faxed at (202) 287-9475. Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or any other government agency.

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